

LOST AND FOUND (or should it be SELF HELP?)

This is a story of happenings on August 26 and 27 1935. There is nothing heroic in the story. It aims only to show that, as so often was necessary in the earlier days of flying, a little thought and the application of some common sense often got a pilot out of a tight corner. It could be argued as the story unfolds that we allowed ourselves to be caught. However, looking back thirty years and more, and remembering that there were no worthwhile radio navigational aids and precious little in the way of reliable ground communication facilities at that stage of overseas aeronautical development, the carefully calculated risk that was taken was justified.

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We ~~have~~ departed Singapore, as was usual, before sun-up. As also was usual at that time of day the sky was overcast but turbulence was not severe. Over Muntok, about half way through the first leg of the run and by which time we were out into sunshine a "noise" developed in one of the port engines; the few engine instruments carried in the DH 86 gave no indication that anything was amiss. The "noise" increased in intensity and a slight vibration could be felt. By throttling back each of the port motors in turn it was quickly evident that the trouble lay in the port inner.

We carried on with three motors but it soon became apparent that there was some quite serious trouble somewhere as, even with the engine now throttled back, the "noise" and vibration were noticeable. By now we were well past PNR in addition to which our only likely alternate, Palembang, was closed due fog; there was nothing left to do but press on to Batavia (now Djakarta).

In due course we landed at Batavia. Either a cylinder head gasket had blown and allowed cylinder head nuts to work loose or nuts having worked loose allowed the gasket to blow. Whatever was the base cause of our trouble does not now matter; what matters is that, as that engine turned, the defective cylinder head was bouncing about one inch and why the whole outfit did not fall apart is not for me to guess. Two cylinder head nuts were found in the cowling while the remaining nuts were holding by one or two threads.

Whether this was a "routine maintenance" job I'm not sure. However we did much of our own routine maintenance in those days and as the nearest Engineer was some 600 miles away we set to work, and, believe it or not, the engine ran like a sewing machine when we finished about 1600 local and too late to go on to Soerabaya that evening. That was the cause of the lost and found story that now follows.

Next morning we departed at 0400 and after a very pleasant run arrived at Soerabaya soon after daylight. We refuelled, collected a few sandwiches and were away again in 19 minutes.

En route to Rambang we decided that if we could get a favourable forecast for the Koepang-Darwin leg and could be reasonably assured of making an Australian landfall before last light we would proceed to Darwin that evening. We, therefore, made a special effort a quick turnaround at Rambang and this we achieved in 20 minutes. *To effect*

As soon as we were clear of the land after departure Rambang we put in a request to Darwin for the desired forecast; in due course it was received and was favourable. Having studied sunset times and having assured ourselves that there was a reasonable margin of safety (assuming that the forecast was reasonably accurate) we decided that, if we would get away from Koepang within 20 minutes of landing, we would carry on and this we did.

Our "sick" motor purred; the weather was fair to good although there was high overcast and the wind on the water was stronger than expected. We took a quick double-drift sight and increased our drift allowance from 5° to 8° port. If that 8° had been 18° we might not have run into trouble.

The sun set behind us; darkness settled over us; a haze merged sea and sky into a grey blanket ahead. Australia seemed to have disappeared.

There was no doubt that we were lost and if we were to get ourselves out of the unusual situation we must do something to help ourselves; this is what was done.

Darwin was asked to send Vs and to continue to send Vs until told otherwise or his Fordson engine that drove his generator packed up. On a blank piece of paper we made a mark - Point "X". From Point "X" we set out on a track of 270° while the aircraft aerial was disconnected, the receiver very carefully tuned to VID and the gain cut back until signals were barely audible.

In due course signals began to weaken. We allowed this to continue for a while to be sure it was not due to fading. We then turned on to a track of 90° and headed back towards point "X". Signals ~~very~~ slowly came up. With one eye on the clock and another on the fuel gauges we carried on in an easterly direction until signals again began to drop off. Once more we turned and headed back towards Point "X" keeping a very careful note of signal strength.

Having arrived back somewhere in the vicinity of Point "X" (we hoped) it was concluded that the maximum signal strength was obtained some 10 minutes flying time to the westward of this point so we proceeded there. The decision must now be taken whether to turn North or South and although we could have been over Bathurst or Melville Islands it seemed reasonably certain that we were over the mainland; we therefore roughly calculated drift from the scrub fires and set out on a course designed to take us in the direction of Darwin. Minutes passed; more minutes passed as one fuel gauge looked very sick but believe it or not signals began to increase in strength. A few more minutes and then, suddenly, both of us saw the Darwin rotating light only a few miles dead ahead but bent at almost right angles under the smoke haze.

We landed a few minutes after 2100 some 2 hours after ETA and it was only then that we realised that, apart from the few sandwiches taken aboard at Soerabaya some 12 hours earlier, we had not eaten since the previous evening.

The mail went south next morning dead on time."